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A BRIEF SKETCH OF  
THE HISTORY OF SANTA CRUZ ISLAND, CALIFORNIA

by

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Santa Cruz Island has a colorful past. It first entered the pages of history when it was sighted during October, 1542, by members of the Spanish exploring expedition commanded by Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, discoverer of the Coast of California. After Cabrillo's death at San Miguel Island early in January, 1543, the ships of the expedition anchored for short periods off the neighboring Santa Cruz Island. The new commander, Bartolome Ferrer (or Ferrello), named the island "San Sebastian." <sup>1</sup>

Later Spanish expeditions sighted the Channel Islands, but there is no record that they were visited again until the voyage of Sebastian Vizcaino in 1602. In December of that year, while anchored at Santa Catalina, he sent his small vessel, the Tres Reyes, on an exploring voyage. The vessel evidently reached Santa Cruz Island, from whence it brought back eight Indians with beards. This incident gave rise to the name "Isla de Gente Barbuda" which was given to the island on the Palacios map. <sup>2</sup>

The present name of the island dates from an incident connected with the first Spanish expedition to colonize Upper California. During April, 1769, the ship San Antonio, on its way from Lower California to join the land divisions of the expedition at San Diego, reached the Santa Barbara Channel. Her commander, Juan Perez, had been misinformed as to the latitude of the port of rendezvous and had sailed too far north. Before the ship turned southward, a

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<sup>1</sup> Henry R. Wagner, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo (San Francisco, 1941), 28-29, 91.

<sup>2</sup> Henry R. Wagner, "The Names of the Channel Islands," in Historical Society of Southern California Annual Publications, XV, part 4 (1933), 20.

party went ashore on one of the islands off the Santa Barbara coast. A friar in the group lost a staff with a cross on it, but friendly Indians found the symbol of Christianity and returned it the next day. The friars and crew were so impressed with this event that they called the island "Santa Cruz," or "Holy Cross."<sup>3</sup> The records of the Perez expedition do not make clear to which of the Channel Islands this name was applied. Evidently it was the one presently known as Santa Rosa.<sup>4</sup>

Apparently the name "Santa Cruz" was not finally fixed upon the island now bearing it until the visits of the British explorer, Captain George Vancouver, to the California coast in 1792, 1793, and 1794. He showed the Channel Islands by their present designations upon his maps, which later formed the basis for British Admiralty charts commonly used by navigators of all nations. Thus today's usage gradually won universal acceptance.<sup>5</sup>

Despite sporadic visits by explorers, Santa Cruz Island did not enter significantly into the history of California until the period of the sea otter trade during the early decades of the nineteenth century. The waters surrounding the Channel Islands teemed with otter, whose lustrous furs brought high prices in the markets of China. Soon after 1800 enterprising traders appeared on the scene to reap this rich harvest. Many of them operated illegally, defying Spanish and Mexican authorities. For the most part these raiders were Yankee sea captains, whose ships carried Aleuts or, later, Northwest Coast Indians who did the actual hunting from their baidarkas or canoes.

These imported Indian hunters were an aggressive and unruly lot. They frequently fought licensed traders for possession of the otter grounds, harassed the local Indians, and even raided the ranches on the mainland. It was after returning from a hunt in the vicinity of Santa Cruz Island that the fierce Kaigani Indians of the ship Lama mutinied off San Miguel Island on November 23, 1838, murdered their captain, and forced the surviving white crewmen to take them back to their northern home.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Walton Caughey, California (2nd ed., Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1953), 107; Gudde, California Place Names (Berkeley, 1949), 315.

<sup>4</sup> Wagner, "The Names of the Channel Islands," 20.

<sup>5</sup> Wagner, "The Names of the Channel Islands," 23.

<sup>6</sup> Adele Ogden, The California Sea Otter Trade, 1782-1848 (Berkeley, 1941), 128-129.

Santa Cruz, along with the other Channel Islands, became known as a notorious base of operations for the illegal otter hunters and for the smugglers who hovered off the California coast seeking to evade Spanish and Mexican customs regulations. Lacking adequate military forces and revenue cutters, the local officials were practically powerless to control these contrabandistas. On July 20, 1838, the Mexican Minister of the Interior authorized the governor of California to grant the islands to responsible citizens "to prevent foreign adventurers from benefitting from them to the great prejudice of our fishery." <sup>7</sup>

In 1830 Santa Cruz Island was associated with one of the more unsavory, if minor, episodes of the Mexican regime. Much to the disgust and distress of the inhabitants of California, the central government occasionally used the province as a penal colony. In February, 1830, about eighty deported prisoners arrived off the Southern California coast from Acapulco in the ship Maria Ester, commanded by a Boston sea captain with the formidable name of John Andrew Christian Holmes. The ship stopped first at San Diego, but not being permitted to land its cargo, sailed on to Santa Barbara.

A number of weeks passed before Captain Holmes could find anyone who would have anything to do with the unwelcome colonists. Finally most of the criminals were allowed ashore and were put to work in the Santa Barbara and Los Angeles region, but late in April thirty or more of the worst were carried by the Maria Ester to Santa Cruz Island. There they were landed to support themselves as best they could with some tools, cattle, fishhooks, and grain furnished by the missions. A fire soon destroyed their meager belongings. Since no one came to their assistance, they eventually built rafts and made their way to the mainland. It is recorded that "as a rule they became very good people." <sup>8</sup> The name "Prisoners Harbor" on Santa Cruz evidently perpetuates the memory of this attempt to protect polite society from the sweepings of Mexico's jails.

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<sup>7</sup> Ogden, op.cit., 131, 212 note 41. Probably, however, the Mexican government was motivated in this new policy more by a desire to reward certain politicians with land grants than by a hope of eliminating the smugglers. Hubert Howe Bancroft, History of California (7 vols., San Francisco, 1884-1890), III, 574-575, 581.

<sup>8</sup> Bancroft, op.cit., III, 47-49.



The first result of Mexico's plan to bring order to the Channel Islands by granting them to private citizens was a petition to the governor of California from the Mexican politician and soldier, Captain Andres Castellero, for the Island of Santa Catalina. Castellero, returning to California in November, 1838, after a political mission to the central government, brought with him not only a copy of the general directive of July 20 but also special instructions recommending that, before any of the islands should be granted, he should be permitted to select one for himself. His first choice was Santa Catalina. It was granted to him by Governor Juan B. Alvarado on March 6, 1839. <sup>9</sup>

Later investigations convinced Castellero that his selection has been a mistake. He found Santa Catalina to lack "absolutely all the necessities for proper improvement of stock or agriculture," and he decided to choose another in its stead. Before the exchange could be effected, Castellero was elected California's representative in the Mexican congress and departed for the seat of government. His petition for one of the Channel Islands was left in the hands of Don Jose Antonio Aguirre, a merchant of Santa Barbara. Acting on Castellero's behalf, Aguirre petitioned for the island "in front of the roadstead of Santa Barbara, known by the name of Santa Cruz." Governor Alvarado acceded to this new request, and signed the grant on May 22, 1839. <sup>10</sup>

Aguirre apparently believed that Castellero had agreed to give him one-half of the island in return for his services as attorney and as compensation for taking care of the property during Castellero's absence. Governor Alvarado, in fact, later declared under oath that it was "publicly known" at the time of the grant that Aguirre had a half interest in Santa Cruz. But the Board of United States Land Commissioners later held that Aguirre had no right to petition for the land since he could offer no written proof that Castellero had sold him part of the island and since he did not demonstrate that he had ever given the property any care. <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> United States vs. Andres Castellero, Case 340 S.D., Transcript of the Proceeding in Land Commission Case No. 176, MS, pp. 4, 12-14, in Office of the Clerk, U.S. District Court, San Francisco.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> United States vs. Jose Antonio Aguirre, Case 334 S.D., Transcript of the Proceedings in Land Commission Case No. 805, MS, pp. 8, 21.

Perhaps Castellero did transfer part of the island to Aguirre or to someone else, since on November 20, 1850, the treasurer of Santa Barbara County sold the "whole of the south eastern half" of Santa Cruz at public auction for nonpayment of taxes. Francisco de la Guerra of Santa Barbara was the high bidder, acquiring half of the island for the sum of \$26. He and his wife, in turn, sold the property during June of the next year to James B. Bolton of San Francisco for \$130. But the Land Commissioners in 1855 refused to recognize Bolton's claim to half the island, saying that there was no proof the tax sale was properly conducted. Instead, the entire island was confirmed by the United States to Andres Castellero, the original grantee. <sup>12</sup>

The ownership status of Santa Cruz Island during the 1850's is not clear from the records available to the present investigator. County histories and other secondary accounts indicate that Castellero did little or nothing with the island until the early 1850's, when he sold it, or perhaps leased it, to the firms of Barron, Forbes & Co. and Jecker, Torre & Co. The new occupants are said to have taken possession in 1852. They placed 200 sheep on Santa Cruz under the care of herdsman sent from Mexico, and the animals are reported to have multiplied rapidly. Santa Cruz by 1856 was reportedly the chief supplier of mutton consumed on the Los Angeles market. <sup>13</sup>

A somewhat different picture of the island's ownership during the 1850's is given by the deposition of James Baron Shaw for use before the United States District Court in 1857. Shaw, a resident of Santa Barbara, stated that he had been Castellero's agent for Santa Cruz since 1851 and that he still served as the local representative "both of the original owners and of the commercial agents of the claimant, who are Bolton, Barron & Co. of San Francisco." He said further that he had paid taxes on the entire island since 1851. In that year the taxes amounted to about \$45, and they had gradually increased until they reached \$373 in 1857.

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<sup>12</sup> Case 340 S.D., Transcript of the Record, MS, pp. 29-37; Ogden Hoffman, Reports of Land Cases Determined in the United States District Court for the Northern District of California . . . (San Francisco, 1862), Appendix, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> History of Santa Barbara County, California . . . (Oakland, California, 1883), 255-256; Harris Newmark, Sixty Years in Southern California, 1853-1913 (Boston: 1930), 216.

Shaw stated that he began to place cattle, horses, and sheep on the island early in 1853, and that since that time his expenditures for stock, houses, corrals, roads, and other improvements had amounted to \$35,000. When Shaw began to develop Santa Cruz in 1853 he found the island inhabited by an "intruder" named James Box, who lived in a little shanty and raised pigs. Box sold his pigs and, at Shaw's request, left in October, 1853. <sup>14</sup>

At any rate, it appears certain that Castellero finally disposed of his interests on the island during 1857. There is on record a deed dated June 21, 1857, by which he transferred the island to William E. Barron. <sup>15</sup>

Evidently Barron continued to operate the property as a sheep or cattle ranch. An old adobe building at Christy Ranch on the west end of the island is a reminder of the Mexican herdsmen who were so important in the early development of Santa Cruz. Painted in primitive style above a door in the adobe is an ornamental cross, and worked into the design is the date "1864." <sup>16</sup>

Barron sold the island on February 16, 1869, to the following individuals: Gustave Mahe, Camilo Martin, Alexander Weill, T. Lemmen Meyer, Nicolas Larco, Adrien Gensoul, Giovanni Battista Cerruti, Justinian Caire, Thomas J. Gallagher, and Pablo Baca. A month later, on March 29, 1869, these men transferred the property to a corporation known as "The Santa Cruz Island Company." Evidently the principal or sole owner of this firm was Justinian Caire, a

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<sup>14</sup> Case 340 S.D., Deposition of James Baron Shaw, January 7, 1857, MS.

<sup>15</sup> "Chain of Title . . . Covering Lots 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 of Santa Cruz Island," typescript copy in possession of J. A. Hussey.

<sup>16</sup> M. Woodbridge Williams, "Santa Cruz--An Island Museum," in Pacific Discovery, vol. VII, no. 1 (January-February, 1954), 18-19.

French resident of San Francisco and one of the group who had purchased Santa Cruz from Barron. <sup>17</sup>

Regardless of Caire's original position in the Santa Cruz Island Company, he soon came to be regarded as the owner of the property. All authorities agree that he was the first person to attempt to realize its full economic potentialities. His objective was to create a self-sustaining domain patterned after a European estate. In the island's beautiful central valley, about five miles inland from Prisoners Harbor, he created an extensive headquarters settlement, complete with ranch house, chapel, blacksmith shop, tannery, winery, storehouse, and quarters for about 100 workmen. His employees grew all their own vegetables. He planted a vineyard which by 1917 was the largest in Santa Barbara County. His Santa Cruz brand wines were widely known. He continued to raise sheep, and his herds are said to have numbered more than 50,000. <sup>18</sup>

An interesting phase of the island's history was the attempt made during the early days of the present century by Captain Ira Eaton to establish a resort at Pelican Bay. This venture was abandoned after several years. The health-giving properties of the island apparently had been established in the popular mind as early as 1854 when a sea captain from San Francisco, Martin Kimberly,

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<sup>17</sup> "Chain of Title....," typescript copy. There are several stories concerning the steps by which Justinian Caire acquired Santa Cruz. Some sources state that he "managed a small cattle ranch" on the island from 1865 to 1869 and that he bought it during the latter year. Charles Hillinger, The California Islands (Los Angeles, 1958), 95; Duncan Gleason, The Islands and Ports of California (New York, 1958), 47. Other sources give a somewhat later date for his final acquisition of control. These sources state that the island changed hands in 1871, being purchased by a corporation headed by J. B. Joyaux. Several years later, these accounts say, the island passed into Caire's hands. History of Santa Barbara County, California, 255-256; Writer's Program, California, Santa Barbara, A Guide to the Channel City and Its Environs (New York, 1941), 70-72.

<sup>18</sup> Gleason, op. cit., 47; Writer's Program, Santa Barbara, 70-72.



sought to cure himself of a pulmonary ailment. It is reported that after a regimen of three years of sun baths alternated with salt and gunny sack rubdowns he regained his health and left the island. 19

After the death of Justinian Caire, said to have occurred in 1898, his heirs gradually left the island, and the colony dwindled. Prohibition and the depression of the 1930's brought financial setbacks, and evidently disagreements and litigation among Caire's descendants made ownership of the island less attractive to the family. 20

In 1936 the heirs offered to sell Santa Cruz for use as a state or national park for the sum of \$750,000. This proposal aroused considerable enthusiasm on the part of the public; but no governmental action was taken except by the California Board of Prison Directors, which desired the island as a prison site. The Caire family announced that it would not sell Santa Cruz for such a purpose, and the plan died. When no public offers to purchase the land for park use were received, the heirs on April 10, 1937, sold 54,488 acres of the property to Mr. Edwin L. Stanton, of Los Angeles, for a reported \$1,000,000. The remaining 8,000 acres at the eastern end were retained by the family and are now owned by Mrs. Ambrose Gherini, of Hillsborough, and her two sons. Both tracts are operated as stock ranches devoted to cattle and sheep. 21

Since February, 1949, the Santa Cruz Island Facility, a Navy relay and coordinating station for the guided missile program, has been situated on one of the island's highest peaks. About 30 Navy and civilian technicians were stationed there in 1958. 22

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19 Writer's Program, Santa Barbara, 70-72.

20 Ibid.; Gleason, op.cit., 47. As the result of an action for partition, a decree of the Santa Barbara County Superior Court on November 16, 1925, divided the island. Tracts 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 were set apart to the Santa Cruz Company. This was the portion of the island sold to Edwin L. Stanton in 1937. "Chain of Title ...," typescript copy.

21 Gleason, op.cit., 47-48; Hillinger, op. cit., 95-97.

22 Hillinger, op.cit., 93-94.